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LEE+SHIRLEY

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Interview with Lee and Shirley Walker
by Rae Swanson and Evelyn McClure for the Western Sonoma County Historical Society March 9, 2010

EM: Should we talk about sports first? When did you first get interested in baseball?

Lee: About when I was ten years old.

EM: Anyone in your family play?

LW: Not much, my dad played in high school. First I wanted to be a jockey when I was younger. We had a horse. I was going to be a jockey then I got too big. I used to listen to the Seals and the Oaks on radio and got interested. All us neighbor kids, every afternoon after school would go play in somebody's pasture, play baseball.

EM: That will get it going, a place to play and kids to play with. Then they had organized baseball in high school. Regular teams that played other schools? And you went to Analy.

LW: Yes, we were in the NBL league which was Vallejo, Napa and San Rafael.

EM: Pretty far to travel. It was then. So then you had to join the military or they drafted you.
LW: They drafted me, I didn't join.

EM: They had sports in the Army?

LW: I played baseball, that's where I got scouted by the Red Socks. We played, when I got out in October, so then we played in San Francisco for the Red Socks scout team.

EM: How did that work out, what kind of a team did they have in San Francisco.

LW: They'd get all these fellows that they are interested in signing and they have a team in the winter time and in San Francisco they play and they look at them further.

RS: That's before a farm team?

LW: Yeah, before you even sign, they're looking at you. We had a chance to sign with Seattle and actually looking back probably the Red Socks was a better deal but we had little guys and we'd been in the Army traveling, Texas, and wanted to stay on the West Coast.

EM: What team was in Seattle?

LW: The Seattle Rainier's.

EM: And that was professional baseball?

LW: Yeah, Coast league, triple A. Which was high up but my curve all wasn't good enough so they sent me down to Salem, Oregon and I played for them.

EM: What was the name of that team?

LW: Senators. So you lived in Oregon. Shirley didn't like it but I liked it.

SW: Every time he went on the road it rained and I had little kids and raining all the time.

LW: And not knowing anybody.

EM: That must have been kind of tough to talk the family along? On road trips.

SW:No we never went on road trips. He did. He went to Idaho, Washington.

EM: How long did you do that?

LW: One summer.

SW: Its beautiful country. We did get to see that.

EM: What years were these?

LW: 1957. Then afterwards I used to pitch batting practice for the (San Francisco) Giants. Willie Mays, you know, Willie McCovey, in those days.
EM: Did you do it for the whole season.

LW: Yeah, I did several years.

RS: Were you on the payroll?

LW: They gave me some cash, but not much. And tickets to the games. Shirley went down.

SW: It was fun to take the boys down to meet the players.

LW: They'd walk around their eyes (big).

SW: My daughter and I got to sit in the stands while they did that.

LW: You're doing a sports thing (exhibit) and what?

EM: It's going to be girls baseball, high school sports and adults baseball. When you were finished with batting practice with the Giants, wasn't there are lot of baseball activity in Sebastopol? Like adults getting together in different leagues?

LW: Earlier, in the 1940s and 50s, hardball team. There was a really good one, they had some great ballplayers. And they always had the softball leagues. They were big time, every night of the week. Different classifications. I played on a DeMolay team. (comments about Lee Torliatt's Arcadia book on sports in Sonoma County) Pretty interesting it goes back to the 20's, has a lot of the Analy teams, town teams.
RS: Where did you go to grammar school?

LW: Vine Hill, 3 of us graduated. Marjorie Oehlmann and Harry (Albredge? spelling?) and myself. 8th grade class. A two room school.

EM: How did you get into growing apples. Your family was in it.

LW: They bought the place during the Depression 1934. And my grandfolks had this place (on Upp Road/off Graton Road) they had it since 1910. You know that paper, (biography section on the Walkers from Prof. Guinn's Coastal History of California,) it talks about the first ones (Walkers) raising apples. I didn't know that.

RS: Was your grandfather Lee Walker?

LW: Edward was my grandfather.

EM: Well they did have a lot of land and did other farming and orchards.

LW: This was great because we didn't know what happened to all that land. My cousin and I talk about it, Ron Crawford and so Shirley and I went to lectures that Gaye LeBaron did and she didn't really know and the impression I got was people squatted on it and in 1860s. And I don't think, I don't know how good their titles were with the old grant. But then reading this it looks like they split it up among family and sold a bunch. So it appears that's where a lot of it went.

RS: Then your father was Lee and he bought the Vine Hill Ranch.

EM: It was your maternal grandparents who had this property (the now Walker apple ranch).

RS: So that's where Bob (Walker) and Alice live?

LW: We inherited it, it was in both our names so Bob and I agreed, I'd take this place and he'd take the other.

EM: This is the original acreage that your grandparents had?

LW: This one, yeah.

EM: And did they have apples.

LW: From 1910. He was a pharmacist (Arthur Upp) and had the store in Graton, a drugstore.

RS: And he worked the land?

LW: His mother was a school teacher, she was principal at Todd School.

RS: I'm getting generations mixed up, I need to go from John (Walker) to Edward to Lee I, to Lee II, to Lee III. He still ranching?

LW: He still helps, in fact the grandkids even help.

RS: I was thinking how kids always used to work in the apples and I don't know of many kids now who do that.

SW: They have so many laws now. Used to be the baby would be under the tree and the little kids would watch the baby and the rest would pick apples.

LW: Lee's youngest boy works every summer. He's done a lot of good stuff.

EM: What kind of apples did they (the Upps) originally plant?

LW: Gravenstein

EM: Really, all Gravenstein?

LW: Primarily, just a few lates as pollinizers.

EM: Did you change plantings over the years?
You have to get rid of trees if they get too old?

LW: Yeah, we've replaced some of the orchard. There's not much of the original left, maybe 70 or 80 trees.

SW: Our tree here (by the house) is going to have its 100th birthday.

RS: So there aren't many apple growers left? Maybe the Roberts?

LW: Not many

RS: I wanted to ask you about the Marshall family. Is Eric Marshall who is doing a lot of apples now, is he connected to Bill.

EM: How did you market your apples when you were first involved with apple farming?

LW: We took them to the cannery and the packing houses.

EM: Barlow or which?

LW: Manzana and the Coop for awhile. Sebastopol Apple Growers. (?) had a dryer in Graton. Where ever we could sell them.

EM: How about Hallberg?

LW: Yeah we sold some there.

EM: Did you have to do a contract or something or just take them there.

LW: In fact you didn't know if you were going to get paid most of the time you took them. We had a fruit stand, at Sousa's corners, Earl Carillo had a little fruit stand across the street from Sousa's.

EM: Did he grow things too, did he have an orchard?

LW: Carillo, yeah, a little one where he lived. So we rented that from him, summer time and fall. That's how we started, about 1966. The reason I know I bought a pickup, the only brand new pickup I ever had and it was 1968 and it got hit, Almost totaled. And it was several years before that we started.

EM: When did Farm Trails come along and you got involved in that?

LW: Somewhere in the 70s. They celebrated with the 32nd/33rd anniversary last year (2009). We're one of the originals to sign the papers on that. When we started there was a big apple tree here and we had towels polishing apples. Then the next thing we did we got a wiper, we went over to Jess/Dorothy Winkler's he had a little packing line and a couple summers we rented that. Then we bought our own wiper and it was sitting outside then we built this building (apple shed). We added on to it 25 years ago.

RS: That's a question I have, when did Mexican people start working in the crops?

LW: 1942 or 3, during the War.

SW: One year weren't they Fiji?

LW: No we had them one or two years.

EM: People came for a season and then left.

LW: In Graton there was a campground there then up at Handy's there was another camp. They had big groves of fir trees and roads all through there and everyone camped there.
That's before the Mexicans and they came back every year the same people and they made a tour of California as the crops came in they moved.

RS: In the 30's?

LW: Yeah.

RS: Somebody asked me the other day if there were permanent structures at Handy's. I didn't think so.

LW: No. the one down here in Graton is where that swamp is now and some oak trees. The people who worked for us used to take my brother and I down for dinner, that was a big deal. They were like family.

RS: Did you every have gypsy workers?

LW: No, they had a bad reputation.

RS: My dad was doing berries and there was one year when there was a hierarchy of berry pickers and one year the gypsies worked, they didn't last long.

LW: You know we had that, my dad bought the Hudson ranch over on Watertrough Road, at Sanders. 150 acres. And my dad bought it in February, 1945 and then he passed away in April, 1945, so my mom had to run it. They had 30 acres of berries on it. A (?) used to come in every year from Lake County, every year they would come and camp there, among the berries. The 4th of July it was always warm, you couldn't deliver on the 4th but the berries would be getting really ripe and they'd all get drunk. Two days they'd be drunk and always screwed up the berry deal.

RS: That's make me think, did you ever plant berries in your apple rows?

LW: No, Hill ranch used to. And cherries.

EM: Why didn't people keep on with berries, too perishable or too hard to pick?

LW: Couldn't make money at it. They raise them other places.
Used to take them to the cold storage in Santa Rosa.

EM: 30 acres is a lot of berries.

LW: They worked them with horses. That was our first job, went to the Hill ranch and picked berries.

RS: Do you plant dwarf or semi dwarf trees?

LW: They don't work, you have to have water, we dry farm

RS: Even after they are established?

LW: The reason they are dwarf is they don't have a big root system, so they don't go down to get water. Semi dwarf are ok but not like the standard trees, they give out after a few years. The only really good thing about them is they bear real quick. 2-3 years you get apples, where the standard tree its 6 or 7 years.

RS: In your experience, in your orchard as a tree dies you replace it with the same variety.

EM: How do you decide to prune an apple tree? Are there many dead branches you cut out?

LW: There are a lot of theories but you can't hurt an apple tree you cut it anyway you want. Its forgiving. You kind of prune the shape and a spot to put a ladder, keep the fruit wood thinned out.

EM: Every year?

LW: You should but you don't have to, but you get better results. Right now the apple industry is in the worse shape its ever been.

EM: Nobody's taking them?

LW: Nobody's buying them. Last year I bet we had 150 tons just rot, couldn't sell them. Prices become depressed too.
Chinese deal, that's what done it, the juice imported. They had a million acres 6-7 years ago they planted another million. They do it so cheap. Labor. Not just the apples, Everything's being out sourced to other lands, they complain about no jobs, that's part of it.

RS: Does you apples support the two families or does he (LeeIII) work outside.

LW: He used to drive truck in December and January when things were slow to make some extra

money but I don't know what's going to happen. We're going to try one more year with apples. Gravensteins are still good, we're doing good with Gravensteins. The cannery told us they could use the Gravensteins this year but after that they don't know. We sell as many fresh as we can sell, depend on how we do that.

EM: You get a lot of people from Farm Trails (maps)?

LW: Yeah, that's help us a lot.

EM: Do you make cider.

LW: No, we had it for awhile at the Fruit stand at Sousa's corners. We had it from (?) on the hill and we had a refrigerator and put it in there. I think back on those days, now people would turn white and throw up their hands if they knew what went into the cider. Sometimes there'd be some yellow jackets floating. Couldn't get too much at a time, or it would turn.

EM: Do you know of anybody freezing it. We had somebody asking about Rosebrook, a family named Rosebrook. Ever hear that name?

LW: Right, Yeah, we raise Rosebrook Gravensteins.

EM: They were asking about that, how did there become a Rosebrook Gravenstein.

LW: They propagated it somehow.

EM: They hybridized it or something.

LW: Do you know where their place was?

EM: No tell me

LW: The fruit stand is still there, its where Mill Station road comes out at 116, go north and 300 yards there is the fruit stand there, on Andy's side. That was Rosebrook property.

EM: Did they sell their trees as a nursery?

LW: I don't know that, its a really great tree, that's all we plant now.

EM: Really, this woman will be just thrilled that you recognize the name, her name is something else, that was her grandparents the Rosebrooks. They died in the 1930s and are buried in Sebastopol. There was an uncle too.

LW: There had to be more Rosebrooks, they were there in the 1960s.

EM: Yeah, the next generation, she said her mother talked about freezing cider.

LW: Yeah, they were big, they had a nice stand.

RS: We used to get frozen cider from Hansens.

LW: Yeah,

RS: I don't know where the apples came from, on Gravenstein Highway South, they had a good stand. We bought from them when we had the fruit stand.

RS: So you picked apples during the day, you packed for your own fruit stand and you worked in the stand.

SW: Well we were only open on weekends at the stand.

LW: How we started out, the brainy idea we were going to sell all these odd ball apples, the old time apples, we specialized, everybody else just had Gravensteins, goldens. So trying to compete with that we did old varieties.

RS: Not necessarily late apples.

SW: They were late apples mostly.

LW: We did Gravs and Astrachans, all kinds, old kinds.
We had one apple, no name apple. We didn't know what it was, it was good, a Pippen of some type. So we put it on the shelf as a No Name. People came back asking for it.

SW: It was sweet. But then everybody started using their apples and Hallbergs had the best amount of apples in the area, the biggest variety.

EM: If you take a chunk of a tree you have to graft it don't you, you can't start it some other way?

LW: No you can't.

EM: Do you have grafted trees?

LW: No, I don't do it.

SW: You did it upside down one time.

LW: I don't have the patience to line it all up.

SW: You have to try to remember which side of the limb is up.

RS: Do you have any photographs.

LW: We have some but we can't find them. Some of harvesting before the bins came out (into use?)

RS: Any of your grandparents, parents?

LW: We have a trailer ...that would have been a good picture.

RS: So when did you go to bins?

LW: In the 60's.

RS: We lived next to Germone's and I can remember the apples going into the bin and waking you up in the morning.

EM: And they just dumped them in, I suppose they went to applesauce or something.

LW: We tried mechanical harvesting too. You shook them off and they'd go into a canvas and into a conveyor. But it didn't work they got cut and bruised and they wouldn't keep.

EM: There must have different size boxes, how big is a box that you used originally? The big ones are lugs are they? The ones I see stacked in your shed?

LW: Those are boxes. They weigh 20 lbs and hold 40 pounds.
(Comments about lady apples, used for decorations.)

End of Tape